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The Unicorn as the Embodiment of the Numinous in the Works of Peter S. Beagle

Weronika Łaszkiewicz

The enduring popularity of Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* (1968)—a delightful story of a mythic creature transformed into a human woman, which blends elements of myths and fairy tales with post-modern irony and a playful approach to literary conventions—as well as the continued presence of unicorns in Beagle's subsequent works have marked the American writer as a notable representative of both fantasy and unicorn fiction (Shwartz and Sherman 478). Though the category of unicorn fiction, which is inarguably less prominent than such well-established sub-genres of fantasy as high/epic and sword-and-sorcery fantasy, is vastly under-theorized and has not been defined beyond the basic assumption that its narratives feature a single-horned beast, Susan M. Shwartz and Josepha Sherman declare that "sooner or later most writers of genre fantasy include a unicorn in one of their books" (478). While this statement is largely exaggerated—even Shwartz and Sherman list only five titles featuring unicorns, one of them being Patrick O'Brian's historical novel *The Hundred Days* (1998)—the scholars are right to claim that the single-horned beast is among the most complex and alluring creatures appearing in both Western and Eastern cultures (474-479). Since the rich symbolism associated with the unicorn has already been thoroughly analyzed elsewhere (see, for instance, Cirlot 357-358; Godfrey 25-29, 105-108; Hathaway), suffice it to say here that over the centuries this creature has epitomized ancient beliefs about the wonders of foreign lands, functioned in the biblical tradition as an image related to divinity and Jesus Christ, reappeared throughout medieval bestiaries, coats of arms, and texts produced by the courtly culture as an embodiment of knightly virtues, and represented social expectations towards sexuality and sexual purity. In fairy tales and folktales, the unicorn has been customarily recognized as a creature of unrivalled beauty and chastity as well as the epitome of magic, which has to be approached with due respect and caution.

While the claim that most fantasy writers eventually incorporate a unicorn in their fiction can be easily contested, it is true that this creature, together with many other non-human characters of myths, fairy tales, and folktales, has been eagerly embraced by modern fantasists, including Peter S.

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Beagle. Beagle's literary output has already been examined in two book-length studies—Kenneth J. Zahorski's *Peter Beagle* (1988) and David Stevens's *Beyond Horatio's Philosophy: The Fantasy of Peter S. Beagle* (2012)—which, though they do not focus exclusively on the writer's unicorn stories, do offer many insightful remarks about *The Last Unicorn* and the author's several non-human characters. Beagle's portrayal of the unicorn has been critically investigated in a number of individual essays. In, for instance, "Werewolves and Unicorns: Fabulous Beasts in Peter Beagle's Fiction" (1986), Jean Tobin analyzes the rich interplay of ancient legends and modernity, which conditions the author's approach to mythic creatures. In "Innocence and Experience and the Imagination in the World of Peter Beagle" (1989), John Pennington demonstrates how in *The Last Unicorn* Beagle uses meta-fictional elements to depict the protagonist and other characters. Geoffrey Reiter, in "'Two Sides of the Same Magic': The Dialectic of Mortality and Immortality in Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*" (2009), explores the theme of (im)mortality which underlies the characters' relationship with the eponymous creature. Finally, in my own "Peter S. Beagle's Transformations of the Mythic Unicorn" (2014), I examined the portrayal of the single-horned beast in Beagle's subsequent works—*The Last Unicorn* (1968), "Julie's Unicorn" (1995), *The Unicorn Sonata* (1996), and "Two Hearts" (2005)—in order to illustrate how the author both retains and alters elements of the original mythos. I argue that Beagle's reconstruction of the mythos allows him to depict unicorns involved, to a varying degree, in the affairs of the mortal world and to examine the desires and fears ruling human existence—though unicorns are central characters of Beagle's narratives and the author clearly wants to enchant his readers with their presence, their primary role is not to tell readers what they might not know about unicorns, but what they might not know about themselves. This essay will complement the above-mentioned studies by analyzing Beagle's most recent portrayal of the unicorn delivered in his novel *In Calabria* (2017) and short story "My Son Heydari and the Karkadann" (2017), which have, so far, received little critical attention. The aim of this essay is to demonstrate that Beagle's latest unicorns function as the embodiment of Rudolf Otto's concept of the numinous, and as such they expand the writer's already complex image of the mythic beast developed since the publication of *The Last Unicorn*.

Rudolf Otto (1869-1937), a prominent German theologian, investigated the concept of the numinous in *The Idea of the Holy* (*Das Heilige*, 1917) which still remains a key text for comparative religion and phenomenology of religion. Otto defines the numinous—a term derived from Latin *numen*, meaning "a deity"—as a divine entity whose nature, due to its explicit and absolute otherness, is beyond the scope of human understanding and thus fills "the mind with blank wonder and astonishment" (Otto 26). In the most basic sense, the numinous is "an object outside of the self" (Nörenberg 551), considered to be

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both non-rational and non-moral. For Otto the attribute of non-rationality indicates that the logic and order of human cognition do not apply to the object of the numinous and hence cannot serve as tools allowing to grasp its nature (Otto 61). The object of the numinous is the utterly remote and wholly Other that cannot be comprehended through reason of the mind (Gooch 115). It is

> beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently 'wholly other', whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb. (Otto 28)

Conceptual understanding of the wholly Other appears only within the structures of a specific religion, which rationalizes the numinous entity in terms more accessible to human reasoning (Almond 55-57) and embeds it within a set of moral values (Almond 77). On its own, the object of the numinous exists beyond the dictates of human morality and should not be judged according to its requirements—the notion of "the holy" is commonly associated by various religions with a specific moral code regulating the behavior of the faithful, which is why Otto introduces "the numinous" as a term liberated from such connotations (Gooch 107). Taking all of these conditions into consideration, Otto argues that something of the inconceivable nature of the numinous can be inferred only from people's emotional reactions to its presence. In other words, emotions elicited from the self in response to the experience of the divine unveil some aspects of the latter's nature (Otto 2-12).

Focusing on this "affective dimension of religious life" (Nörenberg 546), Otto describes the numinous with the attributes of *mysterium tremendum*, *majestas*, *fascinans*, and *augustum*, which denote, respectively, the bewildering inexplicability, staggering magnitude, compelling allure, and undisputable supremacy of the divine. According to the German philosopher, the divine is a great and terrible mystery whose presence, both fascinating and frightening due to its unfamiliar otherness, evokes the feelings of awe, dread, abasement, and absolute obedience (Otto 12-54). A person's experience of the numinous is thus polarized (or suspended) between positive and negative feelings. On the one hand, "The 'mystery' is for him not merely something to be wondered at but something that entrances him; [...] he feels a something that captivates and transports him with a strange ravishment, rising often enough to the pitch of dizzy intoxication" (31). On the other hand, the "aweful majesty" of the numinous (20) generates "the feeling of one's own abasement, of being but 'dust and ashes' and nothingness" (20). An encounter with the numinous puts a person "in face of what is absolutely overpowering, before which there is no alternative to blind, awe-struck obedience" (54).

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The above attributes are interconnected, yet it is possible for one to dominate over the others in a particular moment; for example, the frightening aspect of the numinous may be more pronounced at some point than its capacity to inspire with religious awe (Gooch 115-118). Moreover, a person's emotional response to the numinous is subjected to its own development. At the beginning of his study Otto defines a person's response simply as a "creature-consciousness or creaturefeeling" which he describes as "the emotion of a creature, abased and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures" (Otto 10). Yet one's initial dread of the terrible object of the numinous can be then substituted by a whole gamut of conflicting emotions and eventually transform into intentional worship and adoration (Gooch 122-123; Nörenberg 548-549). It needs to be noted, however, that this shift from dread to adoration does not alter the nature of the numinous since the latter's capacity to repulse and threaten with its otherness is in no way affected by the emotions experienced by those who encounter the divine.

While in his study Otto is chiefly interested in exploring the divine from the affective and religious perspective, he does pay some attention to its presence in art (Otto 66-73). Otto argues that the experience of the numinous—with the numinous broadly perceived as something "mysterious"—stimulates human imagination and thus contributes to the creation of folk tales, fairy stories, myths, and legends (66, 126), which depict various instances of unfamiliar otherness. The scholar does not mention fantasy fiction, which is not surprising given the fact that in the first decades of the 20th century fantasy was not a genre but a loose collection of texts which in different ways diverged from mainstream realism (Attebery 33-154). However, it seems only logical to recognize modern fantasy as yet another literary category indebted to the experience of the numinous since its writers freely borrow figures and motifs from myths and fairy stories (that is, genres mentioned by Otto), and repeatedly challenge their protagonists to deal with various embodiments of the mysterious Other (be it in the form of fantastic gods, mythic monsters or alien races). Noticing these correlations, some scholars of fantasy have already successfully applied the concept of the numinous to their research on the genre (see, for instance, Chris Brawley's *Nature and the Numinous in Mythopoeic Fantasy Literature*, 2014; and my *Fantasy Literature and Christianity*, 2018). Of course, myths, fairy stories, and fantasy fiction cannot become a substitute for an immediate and personal experience of the numinous, yet they can function as a literary representation of a person's encounter with the otherworldly, an indication of their interest in the numinous, and a testimony of their attempt to comprehend it. Thus, the analysis of fantasy fiction and Beagle's unicorn narratives through the prism of Otto's philosophy—in other words, the

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application of theories stemming from the field of phenomenology of religion to the study of literature—is not a futile endeavor.

What is more, it should be noted that in his study on the representations of monstrosity in religion and popular culture, Timothy K. Beal has already made a connection between the concept of the numinous and the figure of the monster. Starting with a general definition of the monster as the Other that "endangers one's sense of at-homeness, that is, one's sense of security, stability, integrity, well-being, health and meaning" (5), Beal explores "the monster"—a word which he derives from Latin *monstrare*, that is, "show" or "reveal," and *monere*, that is, "warn" or "portend" (6-7)—as a "revelation of the holy" that can be either demonized or deified (6). Juxtaposing a person's experiences of religion and monstrosity, the scholar argues that "Both are often characterized as an encounter with mysterious otherness that elicits a vertigo-like combination of both fear and desire, repulsion and attraction" (7). Beal's reasoning is visibly grounded in the vocabulary which Otto uses to describe the numinous, and his argument recognizes the monster as an extension of the divine. As such, the monster (the unicorn included) can be validly investigated in the context of the attributes which Otto ascribed to the numinous.

Though the aim of this essay is to demonstrate how the numinous resurfaces in Beagle's portrayal of unicorns appearing in *Calabria* and "Heydari," it cannot be denied that some traces of Otto's theory can be identified in Beagle's previous stories. The elements of fascination and humility are the most pronounced attributes, as all four works—*The Last Unicorn*, "Julie's Unicorn," *The Unicorn Sonata*, and "Two Hearts"—depict the beast as an alluring Other whose otherworldly beauty invariably mesmerizes and humbles those who encounter the creature. Yet other aspects of the numinous are visibly less prominent and vary between subsequent works. In *The Last Unicorn*, the unfathomable mystery surrounding Unicorn's existence is strongly reduced. Readers are not only given direct access to the protagonist's thoughts and motivation, but also witness her emotional struggles and psychological development accelerated by her transformation into a human woman. Unicorn is, in turn, timid, desperate, conflicted, and unyielding—yet while readers expect this kind of character development from any good narrative, they might not immediately relate it to a mythic beast which is generally introduced as detached from the mortal world. Moreover, while some of Unicorn's actions escape the characters' understanding (for example, she frees the harpy enslaved by Mommy Fortuna despite the threat posed by the creature) or inspire them with religious-like awe (she resurrects Lír), she does not manifest the terribleness of the numinous, which evokes "daemonic dread" (Otto 15) and reduces one's self to abject nothingness (these features are more pronounced in the portrayal of the harpy and the Red Bull, which could be analyzed as the

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novel's other embodiments of the numinous). The same applies to the non-human protagonist of "Julie's Unicorn." On the one hand, the eponymous creature seems more of the true Other than the beast from the pervious story, since the narrator does not offer access to its thoughts and the characters, Julie and Joe, are unable to communicate with the unicorn using human language. On the other hand, the creature's miniature size and desperate need of external help hardly contribute to the image of an all-powerful entity that could evoke the feelings of terror or fearful humility. Thus, even though Julie's unicorn is more enigmatic than its antecedent, it still cannot be associated with the intimidating supremacy and staggering majesty of the numinous.

In *The Unicorn Sonata*, this reduction reaches its peak. Though the protagonist, Joey, clearly respects the unicorns of Shei'rah for their wisdom, strength, and dignity, readers cannot help noticing that the mythic beasts have become more human than ever. Not only can each of them be distinguished by its name, personality, color of the coat, and position within the community, but they can also assume a human body at will, which drastically changes the dynamics of their relationship with the mortal world. Moreover, the main conflict is primarily of a moral nature. The unicorn Indigo, wishing to remain a human forever, intends to sell his horn—a fateful decision endangering the entire unicorn community, because it stems from one individual's youthful egocentrism. Consequently, the novel cannot reach a happy ending until moral requirements are satisfied and Indigo's wish is transformed into one benefiting the community (the gold which he earns for his horn will become a cure for the unicorns). That unicorns are plagued by an illness induced by an individual's morally objectionable conduct and require human assistance to deal with it is a sign that their otherworldly status has been undermined to the point where they can hardly be identified with the non-rational and non-moral object of the numinous. Though they are still a fascinating and somewhat dangerous mystery (for Shei'rah is mostly inaccessible to humans and some unicorns are quite fierce), they can hardly evoke the feelings of humble abasement and numinous terror. A slight reversal to the original unicorn mythos is then visible in "Two Hearts" in which the protagonist of *The Last Unicorn* returns to aid her former companions. Because she appears only for a brief moment, does not engage in any conversation with her human friends, and surprises them with her actions (instead of healing Lír, she resurrects a dog), Unicorn seems beyond human reason and understanding. As such, she might inspire the protagonists with some sense of numinous dread and awe. Yet there is still a stark contrast between her and the unicorns appearing in Beagle's most recent works, whose portrayal incorporates all aspects of the numinous identified by Otto.

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In Calabria (2017) is the story of Claudio Bianchi, a middle-aged Italian farmer, who leads a quiet rural life until one day he discovers a unicorn on his property. The event is all the more surprising because La Signora, as he respectfully names the visitor, is pregnant. Bianchi tries to hide her presence from the local community but soon he has to deal with journalists, environmentalists, and the *'Ndrangheta* (the Calabrese mafia), all of whom are interested in the mythic creature for their own reasons. Fending off their attempts to capture the beast and working out his complicated love relationship with a much younger woman, Giovanna, Bianchi successfully aids La Signora in delivering and protecting her child, though not without some personal sacrifices. The short story "My Son Heydari and the Karkadann," originally published in *The Overneath* (2017), is a father's account of how his son nursed to health a wounded karkadann (the Middle East version of the single-horned beast). Because karkadanns have long been feared and despised by local communities for the threat that they pose to people and animals, the narrator cannot understand his son's wish to save one of them, yet he is also unable to stop him. Though Heydari succeeds in his efforts, the karkadann is eventually killed because it attacks its savior. It is evident that, for all of the differences in their settings and characters, *Calabria* and "Heydari" follow the same pattern (which underlies also Beagle's previous unicorn tales): the lives of ordinary people are disrupted by the sudden appearance of a mythic creature that requires some form of human help. However, the image of the unicorn delivered by *Calabria* and "Heydari" as well as their protagonists' emotional reactions to its presence, which reflect a person's reaction to the numinous, firmly distinguish these narratives from Beagle's previous works.

Though *Calabria* features in total three unicorns—La Signora, her mate, and their child—it is the female beast that has the most impact on Bianchi's life and largely dominates the novel's unicorn imagery. The protagonist is a man deeply wounded by his past. After his child had died in birth, Bianchi's guilt over his inability to help his wife during labor transformed into destructive self-reproach which eventually forced the woman to leave. Though over the years he has managed to find some comfort in solitude and poetry, it is clear he is still plagued by doubts and, as a result, baffled as to why a unicorn should choose his farm as her haven. Readers know better: Bianchi's detachment from the modern world, lyrical soul, and inborn kindness are signs of his pure heart—a quality signaled even by his surname which is derived from the Italian word *bianco* meaning "white." These factors as well as the relative seclusion of Bianchi's farm seem to be a sufficient explanation as to why La Signora should seek his assistance.

The impact which the unicorn's arrival has on Bianchi is identical to a person's experience of the mystery, majesty, and allure of the numinous

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described by Otto. After seeing the creature for the first time, the protagonist is so mesmerized by her otherworldly existence and beauty that he, normally a conscientious and hard-working man, ceases all activities for the rest of the day, becomes oblivious to hunger, and focuses solely on replaying the memory of their encounter. At night, he eventually turns to writing poetry, which serves as an outlet for his unexpected emotional turmoil. In fact, throughout the months which La Signora spends on his farm, Bianchi seems to produce more poems than he has ever before. This proliferation suggests that the appearance of the unicorn—the numinous—is a sublime experience which offers rare artistic stimulation, and that art is one of the means through which a person may try to somehow conceptualize their experience of the divine.

As time passes, Bianchi grows more familiar with La Signora's presence, though she never ceases to be an incomprehensible marvel which he treats with adoring reverence. He can observe her for hours, wondering: "What can you be thinking? What do you remember, so graceful, so serene, gazing so far away, so far beyond my tired fields?" (*Calabria* loc. 568). Of course, he never obtains an answer to his questions: neither can he grasp the nature of the numinous nor will the numinous explain itself in human terms. Bianchi's deferential attitude is mirrored by the behavior of his animals: the goat follows the unicorn with worshipful submission, the cats remain at a respectful distance, and the cows are openly afraid of the visitor. The element of terror is, in fact, emphasized already during Bianchi's second encounter with the beast when he asks the unicorn if her appearance is a sign of his imminent death. His question implies that, for all of his reverential awe, he does recognize the unicorn as the wholly Other whose presence can be a threat to his mortal existence. Nonetheless, his fascination with La Signora is still greater than his fear, so he follows her throughout his farm, promises to protect her once he discovers her pregnancy, and even guards her during winter nights, thus demonstrating the extent of his submission and devotion. Bianchi also openly admits to himself that so much time spent in the company of a unicorn has made him different, though he cannot say precisely in what way (loc. 586).

Yet an encounter with the numinous can be both a blessing and a curse, as the protagonist eventually learns. His farm, poetry, and love life evidently flourish thanks to La Signora's presence (*Calabria* loc. 1105), and his active participation in the colt's birth allows him to recover, at least partly, from the trauma of his past failure. What is more, the birthing of the colt, during which Bianchi apparently bites off its umbilical cord (loc. 661), seems to deepen his relationship with the unicorns, even if he still no wiser about their true nature. After the event, the protagonist can "feel their nearness, whether waking or dreaming" (loc. 1077) and La Signora, as if in recognition of his unwavering dedication, touches him out of her own will. Perhaps his deed during the birth

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tapped into the domain of the most primeval symbols and rituals, which reverberate even with the non-rational and non-moral nature of the numinous. Nonetheless, this new intimacy between Bianchi and the unicorns does not ease the protagonist's feelings of his own nothingness and need for submission in the face of the divine. For one thing, Bianchi knows fully well that while La Signora remains a mystery to him, he is utterly transparent to her: "Her eyes, as always, reached through Bianchi's own and beyond them, to the farthest recesses of his heart" (loc. 945). Then, when he tells Giovanna how La Signora blessed him with her horn, he admits: "it hurt terribly, like a brand, the way we do with cattle, horses, so that everyone will know they are ours" (loc. 1482). His words reveal that he is aware of the inequality in their relationship: the unicorn's touch is both a rare privilege and a sign of her indisputable authority over a lesser creature. Finally, the moment when Bianchi looks deeply into La Signora's eyes becomes a liminal experience which indicates just how alien, and therefore dangerous, the creature truly is:

> [he] lost himself in a bright wilderness: a forest filled with glowing, shifting shadows, where nothing threatened, but nothing he knew applied, nothing he recognized held its shape for long. He felt himself altering, amending, as he wandered there—for how long?—until he had to make himself return while there was still a *himself* to command. (*Calabria* loc. 1277)

The unicorn's presence becomes a threat to the protagonist also in a more physical way: because of her, Bianchi is attacked by the *'Ndrangheta* whose leader, like the obsessed King Haggard from *The Last Unicorn*, wants to take possession of the beast—a sin of greed which is still punished by Beagle with death. However, while Haggard perishes almost accidentally, buried under his falling castle when the imprisoned unicorns escape, the leader of the *'Ndrangheta* is mortally wounded, falling prey to the unicorn's ruthless ferocity. Still, though the unicorn's capacity for violence inarguably points to the threat posed by the beast, the true terribleness of the numinous is manifested by the creature's lack of concern for Bianchi's safety, emphasized during his temporary union with it.

Readers might be disappointed to see that when the protagonists are attacked by the mafia, La Signora does nothing to aid them. But Bianchi himself is not surprised by such an outcome (*Calabria* loc. 1520), because he knows better than to expect emotional attachment or a sense of moral obligation from a numinous creature. The unicorn is indifferent to his suffering and beyond such man-made concepts as gratitude and compassion. Thus, to somehow save himself and his lover, Bianchi on impulse mounts La Signora. Almost instantly his senses lose focus and the material world around him becomes diluted and ethereal. As he desperately tries to stay on the unicorn's back, he realizes that

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she is "something that did not know him, a white vastness that wished him neither evil nor any recognizable good, but only its own immortal freedom and power" (loc. 1586). Bianchi's experience of the unicorn's nature can be easily translated into Otto's vocabulary of the numinous: an inconceivable entity whose overpowering majesty escapes human cognition. The intensity of this experience elicits from the protagonist a "wail of hopeless terror and loss" (loc. 1592)—a sign of his daemonic dread, which is then further exacerbated by the arrival of a black unicorn, La Signora's mate. Beagle's description of the black beast also clearly corresponds to Otto's image of the numinous: Bianchi declares that "if *La Signora's* beauty was barely comprehensible to human vision, her mate could exist for such vision only as fury" (loc. 1598), and that his eyes "were too terrible to meet" (loc. 1605). Thus, even more than the female unicorn, the male beast is depicted as a terrifying Other that epitomizes the awful and appalling side of the numinous—and the protagonist is too wise to deceive himself by thinking that he can approach or in any way influence such a creature.

Instead, utterly frightened, Bianchi dismounts La Signora and immediately begins to suffer because he is unable to readjust to the material world—his human senses are completely disturbed by the direct contact with the numinous and his mortal existence is shaken to the point that he asks himself: "*Is this what living looks like to the dead?*" (*Calabria* loc. 1614). Bianchi then acts and speaks as if he were possessed by some external force which mortifies those around him. Afterwards, Giovanna claims that the man's shadow at that moment was not his own as it had a horn (loc. 1704). Since the protagonist himself is not sure what exactly happened to him, readers can only speculate if it was his short union with La Signora that temporarily altered his human nature or whether he was indeed possessed by the spirit of the black unicorn. It is most probably because of these liminal experiences that Bianchi does not seem particularly sad about the unicorns' departure. He understands that regardless of their exquisite beauty, they are too alien, threatening, and indifferent to human existence for people to desire their company: while the revelation of the numinous may inspire a person with wonder and lead to spiritual and artistic exaltation, its constant overpowering presence would be too much to bear for a mortal soul.

A similar message is delivered in the short story "My Son Heydari and the Karkadann." From the very beginning, the eponymous creature is presented as a monster and a menace to Persian traders and farmers, so the narrator—Heydari's father—is quite happy with the fact that they are slowly disappearing as a species ("Heydari" loc. 334). His matter-of-fact, almost scientific, description of their eating and reproduction habits (loc. 343-378) suggests that the Persian community is well acquainted with these beasts and that there is

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hardly anything extraordinary (otherworldly) to their existence. This assumption is then contested by Heydari's own adventure with the rescued karkadann which proves to be the most estranging and threatening creature among all of Beagle's unicorns—the numinous Other *par excellence*.

To start with, the beast, even though it is severely wounded, repeatedly tries to attack Heydari, and the boy knows that if he is not careful enough, he will be killed in an instant. The creature also does not accept the boy's touch beyond that necessary for its survival, firmly rejecting even that sort of hard-earned intimacy that eventually develops between Bianchi and La Signora. This physical barrier between the protagonist and the unicorn serves to emphasize their spiritual estrangement: though Heydari, like Bianchi, spends hours observing the karkadann, he is nowhere near grasping its thoughts and reducing the threat that the beast poses to him. In this respect, the boy's description of the karkadann clearly reflects Otto's language of the numinous: "it was a dreadful creature, wicked and heartless like all the rest of its kind . . . but oh, it was magnificent too—splendidly terrible" ("Heydari" loc. 445). The adjectives "dreadful," "magnificent," and "terrible" indicate that Heydari is aware of just how dangerous the unicorn is, but he is nevertheless irrevocably drawn to its side in spite of his better judgment—the elements of *tremendum* and *fascinans* are in a precarious balance that may be tipped at any moment. Moreover, the explanation offered by Heydari to his father proves that the boy knows how vulnerable he is in the presence of the karkadann: it "was like dancing on the edge of a knife blade, or a great abyss, knowing that if you keep dancing there you will very likely fall to your death—but that if you *stop* dancing, you surely will" (loc. 582). Yet the boy also tells his father that he "was terrified every moment, but in a wonderfully calm way" (loc. 582)—a paradoxical state evoked by the terrible yet captivating object of the numinous.

Because neither Heydari nor his companion, Niloufar, fall under the illusion that they can alter the karkadann's nature with their kindness ("Heydari" loc. 454), they are prepared for the fatal moment when the beast, now fully healed, suddenly attacks the boy. Similarly to La Signora, the karkadann rejects any bonds with humankind, but while La Signora's rejection is manifested in her indifference to Bianchi's fate, the karkadann demonstrates it through rampant violence. It should be noted that neither creature ever actually asks for help: the protagonists offer it independently and willingly, though they are inarguably inspired to devotion and submission by the numinous nature of the beasts. Heydari, though mortally afraid for his life during the attack, is still mesmerized by the unicorn in all of its ferocious glory, and it is only thanks to Niloufar's intervention that he is saved from imminent death. Because the protagonists cannot control the violent beast in any way, be it through emotional attachment or moral obligations, the creature has to be

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killed—a tragic precedent in Beagle's unicorn fiction. In fact, both "Heydari" and *Calabria* prove that the author is still able to surprise his audience with new readings of the traditional unicorn lore. The birth of La Signora's child, Bianchi's ride on her back which defies the "maiden and unicorn" trope and allows the man to temporarily partake of the unicorn's nature, and—most importantly—Beagle's depiction of the unicorn as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* which evokes a range of emotions akin to those elicited by the numinous, are all cases in point.

As a result, the unicorns of *Calabria* and "Heydari"—more numinous and monstrous than their antecedents—significantly expand Beagle's unicorn imagery developed since the publication of *The Last Unicorn* in 1968. They are the embodiment of Otto's numinous whose inexplicable nature both fascinates and frightens people, and disturbs their ordinary lives with its manifestation. Since Beagle has, so far, seldom commented on *Calabria* and "Heydari" in interviews, it is difficult to determine unequivocally if he was directly inspired by Otto or if such a portrayal is the result of his intuitive conviction that his previous stories have not done justice to the image of the mythic beast. It is also possible that, as a versatile writer who consciously experiments with different narrative conventions (as illustrated by, e.g. *The Last Unicorn*, *The Innkeeper's Song*, and *Tamsin*), Beagle deliberately designed his latest works to explore another facet of the complex unicorn imagery, thus revealing to his readers new terrains of his literary imagination. As Michael Weingrad aptly observes,

> Beagle writes fantasies of a self-reflective sort. When he writes about magic, he often seems to be writing about writing, which makes sense. After all, magic and writing both involve a mysterious power, inherited from old books yet requiring individual talent, susceptible to formula but ultimately eluding mere technique, demanding solitary toil and no little sacrifice, and pursued in the hope of yet another rare miracle. (Weingrad)

It is worth noting that Beagle's latest depiction of the unicorn significantly alters the message which he delivers to his readers. In contrast to the previous tales, the stories of Bianchi and Heydari are primarily narratives of one's encounter and confrontation with the wholly Other. According to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, the monster as the Other is a social construct which reveals what is considered desirable and deplorable by a particular community (Cohen 3-25). On the one hand, to enter into any relationship with the monstrous Other means to violate social restrictions and, consequently, risk one's safety and position within the community. On the other, the transformative power of such a social rebellion involves potential liberation and growth, which often can be achieved only through the rejection of long-established norms or patterns of behavior. Both Bianchi and Heydari are visibly changed by their encounter with unicorns,

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having learnt something new about themselves, the Other, and the mysteries of the world. Through their adventures, Beagle tells his readers that a meeting with the Other—though dangerous not only to people's physical safety but, more importantly, to their ingrained habits of thinking and feeling—opens a path to self-development and is, therefore, a necessary and desirable experience. His narratives also allow readers to entertain, even if for just a moment, the thought that there is still something magical and otherworldly hidden in the computerized and consumption-obsessed world of the 21st century.

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